

Testimony Submitted by Gordon N. Merrick
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to the
House Appropriations Committee: Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Pertaining to FY 2024 Appropriations for United States Department of Agriculture
Research, Education, and Economics Agencies and Programs
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Chair Harris, Ranking Member Bishop, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF) to detail our fiscal year 2024 funding requests for USDA-REE agency programs important to the maintenance and growth of the organic sector. We have four specific requests: (1) \$35 million and report language for organic agriculture topics at the Agricultural Research Service (ARS); (2) \$10 million for the Organic Transitions Research Program (ORG) operated by the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA); (3) \$60 million, or full authorized levels for the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE) operated by NIFA; and (4) \$1 million for the Organic Data and Markets Initiative (ODI), a joint initiative of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Economic Research Service (ERS), and the National Agricultural Statistical Service (NASS).

USDA - Agricultural Research Service

Research into organic agriculture topics at ARS facilities

Request: \$35 million and report language

Organic farming is a bright spot in the agriculture economy, yet organic producers across the country remain disadvantaged by the lack of research on basic agronomic and economic challenges. Funding from the USDA ARS for organic farming research is not commensurate with the continued rapid growth of the organic market. In fact, according to ARS data, current organic farming research funding within the agency represents less than one percent, or about \$15 million, of the total ARS research budget. Meanwhile, the organic sector's market share is six percent, which should reflect over \$120 million in ARS research funding. This funding gap must be closed to provide equity and address barriers to wider adoption of organic production practices. Investments in organic agriculture research will advance the substantial contributions of the organic sector's efforts to address pressing environmental, climate, and human health concerns. The ARS research facility located in Salinas, California conducts the sole organic focused research project in the country, and continues to produce high quality, action-oriented research products but continues to face budget constraints and is at risk.

The ARS recently released its Organic Research Priorities and roadmap for organic research to the Appropriations Committees. These priorities highlight the need for continued and expanded investments into researching organic crop and livestock production necessary to provide organic farmers cutting edge, usable research and technologies. Putting this plan into action is critical to meet the needs of organic and transitioning to organic and transitioning to organic producers.

ARS works at the forefront to find solutions to agricultural problems. The long-term research carried out at the agency is and will continue to be critical in preparing farmers and ranchers, organic and non-organic, to adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis. ARS National Programs and LTAR sites support long-term basic and applied research vital to the understanding of phenomena such as soil carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, plant-soil-microbe interactions, and climate resilience in different farming systems. We believe that increasing funding for organic research, building on the just-released ARS strategic plan for organic research, will help the agency address the historical lack of investment in organic agriculture research and help organic and non-organic producers alike overcome challenges to realize their potential to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of the climate crisis.

In conjunction with that agency plan, we believe that appropriators should act to ensure organic agriculture receives its share of the ARS research budget to reverse the chronic underinvestment in organic research at the agency. A \$20 million increase in Fiscal Year 2024 would put the ARS research budget on a path toward an equitable distribution of research funding for organic agriculture over the course of the next several fiscal years. ARS looks to the Appropriations Committee for their direction, and providing clear support for expanding organic agriculture research is necessary for ARS to act.

Therefore, we request the following ARS report language:

The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) currently invests \$15 million, or less than one percent of their budget, into organic farming research. Meanwhile, the organic sector's market share is six percent and growing. Organic's fair share of the total budget should reflect over \$120 million in ARS research funding; this \$35 million request in FY24 is a down payment toward meeting the need. This funding gap must be closed to provide equity and address barriers to wider adoption of organic production practices. Investments in organic agriculture research will advance the substantial contributions of the organic sector's efforts to address pressing environmental, climate, and human health concerns.

Previous report language:

FY 23 House report: <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt392/CRPT-117hrpt392.pdf#page=19>

Organic Research.—The Committee looks forward to receiving the five year plan requested in House Report 117–82.

FY 22 House report: <https://www.congress.gov/117/crpt/hrpt82/CRPT-117hrpt82.pdf#page=23>

Organic Research.—The Committee directs ARS to develop a five-year plan for organic food and agriculture research encompassing all relevant crop, animal, nutrition, and natural resource national programs.

USDA - National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Organic Transitions Program

Request: \$10 million

This is a key competitive grants program that supports organic agriculture research at universities around the country, including many research programs that benefit farmers and consumers across the United States. The overall goal of the Organic Transition Research Program (ORG) is to support the development and implementation of research, extension and higher education programs to improve the competitiveness of organic livestock and crop producers, as well as those who are adopting organic practices and transitioning to organic certification. Investing in organic systems research is an effective way to invest in developing tools to support both climate mitigation and adaptation through land management. Practices and systems addressed by ORG include those associated with organic crops, organic animal production, and organic systems integrating plant and animal production. ORG consistently receives more funding requests than can be accommodated as consumer demand for organic products outpaces domestic production. For example, in 2020 there were 34 applications and only 12 awards distributed. Without continued funding of ORG as an organic-specific research grant program, this gap will only increase.

The program should be funded at \$10 million in FY2024, to ensure that U.S. farmers and ranchers have the information and technology necessary to meet the high demand for organic products in the marketplace.

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program

Request: \$60 million

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has a clear and consistent focus on sustainability and farmer-driven research. For over 30 years, SARE has been at the forefront of research and extension activities for farming systems based on profitable and environmentally sound practices developed with farmer and business input. Despite SARE's

popularity and demonstrated administrative efficiency, after more than 30 years of proven on-the-ground results, the program has yet to reach its full authorized amount of \$60 million. As a result, USDA can only fund roughly ten percent out of all eligible research and education pre-proposals submitted to the program each year. We urge Congress to provide full funding at \$60 million for SARE in FY 2024.

**USDA - Economic Research Service, Agricultural Marketing Service, and National
Agricultural Statistics Service**

Organic Data Initiative

Request: \$1 million

The Organic Data Initiative (ODI) collects and disseminates data regarding organic agriculture through the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Economic Research Service (ERS), and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). This program has been successful in providing valuable information to Congress, government agencies, and the organic sector. Funding specifically designated to the Organic Data Initiative is used for economic analysis, organic risk assessments, survey and statistical analysis, and market data collection and analysis. We urge strong funding for this small but valuable program, this increase in funds would allow for stronger intra-agency cooperation and be used to modernize systems and provide high-value, accurate organic price reporting and organic data collection.

Organic farms, both certified and non-certified, throughout the United States, representing an over \$52 billion industry, will benefit from an increase in organic farming data tools and functions.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit, and your consideration of these requests. I look forward to discussing them with you in the future.

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Organic Farming Research Foundation